

Goodbye Cleveland!

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As both a basketball fan and an urban historian, I found myself fascinated by the now ex-Cavalier LeBron James' public humiliation of his former team and city. It is clear that James did not handle his exit from Cleveland with anything resembling the grace and poise he displays on the basketball court. Dan Gilbert, the owner of the Cavaliers, also put his worst foot forward, as seen in the bizarre, hateful press release he issued immediately after witnessing James' ESPN special/spectacle (one must admire Gilbert's situational understanding of "loyalty": did Gilbert feel any sense of loyalty to the 250 individuals that his company, Quicken Loans, let go in June 2008?). And then there are the ever-suffering Cleveland sports fans, let down once again by those they raised to near-royal status. The unthinkable has happened: the king has left his subjects in the lurch.

Many commentators were struck by the immediate reaction to the news among Cavs fans. At least one such individual burned his LeBron James's "23" jersey in the street, while others took to throwing rocks at the James' billboard outside of the Quicken Loans Arena. Yes, it's sad that James is moving on to sun-soaked Miami, but did this occurrence really warrant such extreme responses? After all, as my father used to tell me after a particularly rough night at the foul line, it's only a game.

Yet in the context of a Rust Belt city like Cleveland, James's decision to jump ship to Miami must be understood within the broader history of the city. The way that Cavs fans began to talk about James's betrayal sounded a whole lot like the language once used to address the disloyalty of firms who left the city during the peak of deindustrialization. In many ways, James' choice to leave Cleveland is but another stop on the longer narrative of abandonment in Cleveland, another reminder that anything deemed productive and of great value will inevitably leave the city. But the James episode is also a cautionary tale of the shortcomings of post-industrial development. In the rush to use sports figures and sporting arenas as engines of economic growth, city developers and their allies often repeated the mistakes of the past. Such a development strategy turned James into nothing more than a commodity, and commodities, as deindustrialization once taught us, care little about place—and even less about loyalty.

Things didn't always look this bad for Cleveland. By the turn of the last century the city housed the third largest amount of corporate headquarters in the nation, behind only New York and Chicago. At the same time, industrial firms such as U.S. Steel, the Leece-Neville Company (manufacturer of electrical products), the Carling Brewing Company, the Coit Road Fisher Body Division of General Motors, and National Screw provided jobs for countless residents of Cleveland. And people flocked to the city: by 1950, Cleveland's population stood at 914,808.

Yet the forces unleashed by economic globalization hit Cleveland hard. By the late 1960s/early 1970s plant closings had become commonplace, with firms like the Carlin Brewing Company shuttering their doors forever. By the 1980s, the situation had gone from bad to worse. U.S. Steel closed its last Cleveland plant in 1984, while the Coit Road General Motors facility had closed shop in 1983—a decision that led to the loss of over seventeen hundred jobs. By the late 1980s, Cleveland was but a shell of its former self, as (predominantly white) people fled the city in large numbers. By 1990, the city's population stood at just 505,616. Those that remained in the city expressed disbelief in the fact that so many people—and, more importantly, companies—could simply pack up and leave the city. The narrative of abandonment had come to define Cleveland.

It was this story that the world of sports was meant to directly address. Throughout the 1990s, city after city recast sports teams as engines of economic growth. Central to this strategy was the belief that public/private partnerships to build new, downtown arenas would revive dying cities. Cities such as Baltimore (Camden Yards, 1992), Denver (Coors Field, 1995), and Detroit (Comerica Park, 2000) all believed that new stadiums would attract both people and capital back to the downtown area. Not surprisingly, Cleveland got into the act as well, opening up Gund Arena (now Quicken Loans Arena) in 1994, as part of the city's broader Gateway Project redevelopment plan. Such state-of-the-art facilities, in addition to appealing to city-wary suburbanites, were also meant to attract top athletic talent, talent like LeBron James.

Such a development strategy proved remarkably lucrative for athletes like James, but it didn't seem to do a whole lot for the rest of the citizens of Cleveland. In 2004, as James was finishing up his first season as a Cavalier, it was announced that Cleveland had the highest rate of poverty in the nation. After James' second season, statistics were released that found that Cleveland had lost 24 percent of its manufacturing jobs in the first five years of the twenty-first century. Like jobs, people also continued to flee Cleveland: new census estimates show that Cleveland had the largest numerical decline in residents during 2009, dropping 2,658, or close to one percent of the population (by comparison, Detroit, often held up as the poster child for abandonment, lost 1,713 residents during the same period). And in May 2010, as Cleveland residents pleaded with James to stay, the city's unemployment rate hovered around ten percent.

All of this is not to blame one athlete for the sorry state of a major metropolitan area. Instead, the example of LeBron James shows us that it may be time to rethink

how we revive American cities, as the strategy of growing economies through sporting arenas has proven ineffective. Don't believe me? Look past Cleveland and focus on Baltimore, where during the opening week of the 2010 baseball season the Orioles drew the smallest crowd in the history of their stadium – 9,129 fans. The diminishing amount of fans may have something to do with the fact that people, as in Cleveland, continue to flee the city. In March 2010 it was announced that the city has lost about three percent of its residents since 2000. To re-grow interest in his team, Baltimore Orioles owner Peter Angelos has publicly declared that what the city needs is a new arena—funded in part by taxpayer dollars—to replace what he has called “antiquated” Camden Yards, a stadium that is not yet twenty years old.

In light of such pronouncements, the time has come to realize that the health of a city relies on more than just a young man who can dunk a basketball, or a team that has a shot to reach the playoffs. Look beyond the loss of James in Cleveland and one can see such groups as the Civic Innovation Lab, a group that provides both start-up funding and volunteer assistance for individuals trying to start businesses in the city. One recently funded endeavor transformed an abandoned city mall into the “Gardens Under Glass” project, a self-described urban eco-village that features carts of vegetables and fruits grown on site, under the mall's arching glass domes. The group has also funded companies developing “green” energy sources and new curriculum models for Cleveland's struggling public school system.

Given the city's history, it makes sense for Cleveland residents to place James' decision within the broader narrative of abandonment—and to grieve for such a loss. Yet in their grief one hopes that those in Cleveland, indeed those across the country, come to realize that their cities remain remarkably resilient—and to rethink what it means to truly develop such regions. Athletes, like firms, will leave. Instead, focus development on those who are most invested in the health of their cities: city residents themselves.

- See more at: <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/129003#sthash.Kmz2Nwja.dpuf>

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